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HEADLINE: SCHOOL PLAN DESERVES FAIR LOOK

BODY:

You can always count on **Madison** Teachers Inc. to fight any changes in the status quo, whether the status quo is steadily rising school taxes or innovative educational programs aimed at helping students.

So it's no surprise that MTI objects to a **Franklin** School proposal -- touted by some teachers as well as administrators -- to end special classes for students with learning problems and substitute smaller classes with special help throughout the school.

This is, after all, the same teachers union that objected strenuously to La Follette High School's experiment with longer class periods. That experiment, called a four-block schedule, is showing promising results in reducing absenteeism and increasing student achievement.

The four-block schedule, used in less than a dozen high schools throughout southern Wisconsin, substitutes four 90-minute class periods in a school day for the conventional high school schedule of seven 50-minute classes. It allows students to delve deeper into subjects; finish a subject in a semester that would otherwise take a year to complete, and take more subjects over the course of a school year.

Preliminary findings at La Follette include a 35 percent increase in the number of students making the honor roll; a 51 percent increase in the number of students taking more difficult math classes like calculus and statistics, and a 41 percent drop in the number of school days missed.

MTI Executive Director John Matthews had a predictable response back in 1996 when a group of La Follette teachers, administrators and parents proposed the four-block schedule: Teachers need more money.

He also objected strenuously when then-Superintendent Cheryl Wilhoite implemented the change instead of taking it to the bargaining table. He accused Wilhoite of imposing the plan on the teachers instead of getting them all to agree to it.

That's akin to the objections he has voiced so far on the **Franklin** plan: Criticizing **Franklin** Principal Deborah **Mercier** for going ahead with the plan before all **Franklin** teachers have agreed to it.

The **Franklin** plan would end special classes in which students who need extra help are pulled out of their regular classes. Up to 20 percent of **Franklin** students have limited English ability, and others need help with reading or math.

The **Franklin** plan would end separate classes in English as a second

language, remedial reading and math, and would reassign those special teachers to work with primary teachers within their classrooms. It would also enable the school to cut class sizes from 24 students to 16; some studies suggest that smaller classes during the K-2 grades dramatically improve children's chances for success.

Since **Franklin** serves only K-2 students, it is a logical place to conduct such an experiment in the **Madison** district. If ever the public schools are to move away from the questionable practice of pulling out students from general classes at the drop of a hat, some new techniques must be tried.

But an experiment means a change, and MTI doesn't like change -- even if, as at La Follette, some of MTI's own members are firmly in favor of the plan.

The final verdict is not in on La Follette's four-block schedule experiment, and it will take time to judge whether the **Franklin** plan is producing the desired results. Nevertheless, it's worth a try, even if John Matthews doesn't like it.

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